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Media Relations

March 18, 2013

UNH Historian Wins Prestigious 2013 Bancroft Prize

Award Recognizes Book about Human Impact on Ocean



W. Jeffrey Bolster, an associate professor of history at the University of New Hampshire and professional seafarer, has won the 2013 Bancroft Prize for his book, "The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail." Credit: UNH Photographic Services.

DURHAM, N.H. – Columbia University announced today that W. Jeffrey Bolster, associate professor of history at the University of New Hampshire, is one of two recipients of the 2013 Bancroft Prize for his gripping and eloquent history of the human impact on the ocean.

Bolster is the author of "The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail" (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012). The other winner is John Fabian Witt of Yale University for "Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History" (Free Press, 2012).

According to Columbia University, the winning works, while different in subject matter, demonstrate the powerful impact of re-examination of historical events in an ever-changing, ever-evolving world.

While overfishing is often thought of as a contemporary problem, Bolster reveals in "The Mortal Sea" that humans were transforming the sea long before factory trawlers turned fishing from a hand-liner's art into an industrial enterprise. The western Atlantic's legendary fishing banks, stretching from Cape Cod to Newfoundland, have attracted fishermen for more than 500 years.

Bolster follows the effects of this siren's song from its medieval European origins to the advent of industrialized fishing in American waters at the beginning of the 20th century.

"Beginning the story well before industrialization emphasizes the longevity of people's short-sighted impact on the ocean, and emphasizes, as well, how modern technology was not necessary to affect the balance of nature," Bolster says.

"With its deep roots, this tale is probably the longest history possible of Euro-Americans' interaction with any aspect of their natural environment, a story of unrealistic hopes, frequent articulated concerns, destruction, and denial," he says.

The Bancroft Prize is awarded annually by the trustees of Columbia University. Winners are judged in terms of the scope, significance, depth of research, and richness of interpretation they present in the areas of American history and diplomacy. There were 223 books nominated that were considered for the 2013 prize.

Columbia Provost John Coatsworth will present the awards at the Bancroft Prize dinner next month, hosted by the department of history and Columbia University Libraries. The Bancroft Prize, which includes an award of \$10,000 to each author, is administered by James Neal, Columbia University librarian and vice president for information services.

“Historical scholarship with innovative and new and rigorous examinations and exciting boundary challenges, as evidenced by the content and scope of this year's Bancroft Prize winners, is so worthy of our celebration and recognition. We applaud the excellence in research, writing and thought demonstrated by the two works selected this year,” Neal said.

Formerly a professional seafarer, Bolster has published widely on the interaction of people with the sea and is the recipient of numerous awards, including an Excellence in Public Service Award from UNH in 2005. “The Mortal Sea” grew out of his decade-long involvement with the Census of Marine Life, an interdisciplinary, international research project working on marine environmental history and historical ecology globally.

The Bancroft Prize was established at Columbia University in 1948 with a bequest from Frederic Bancroft, a preeminent historian, librarian, author, and Columbia University lecturer. It is considered one of the most distinguished academic awards in the field of history.

Columbia University Libraries/Information Services is one of the top five academic research library systems in North America. The collections include over 11 million volumes, over 150,000 journals and serials, as well as extensive electronic resources, manuscripts, rare books, microforms, maps, and graphic and audio-visual materials. The services and collections are organized into 22 libraries and various academic technology centers. The Libraries employs more than 500 professional and support staff. The website of the Libraries is the gateway to its services and resources: library.columbia.edu.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

PHOTO

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<http://www.unh.edu/news/img/bolster.jpg>

Credit: UNH Photographic Services

VIDEO

W. Jeffrey Bolster, an associate professor of history at the University of New Hampshire and professional seafarer, discusses his book, “The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail.”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOSjZsR8tIY&noredirect=1>

Credit: UNH Video Services

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